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A case of cloak and slapstick

As a spy, Ronald Pelton was about as slick as the Three Stooges.

He was broke, he was pouring vodka and orange juice into himself every day and injecting himself with an opiate painkiller a couple of times a week. He was having marital problems and trying to pay the bills for a girlfriend, and he couldn't hold a job.

More than that, he was making phone calls to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, which were intercepted by U.S. authorities, and he even walked right in the front door of that embassy, which is hardly an inconspicuous act.

And still it took the FBI and assorted other U.S. agencies involved in intelligence and counter-intelligence more than five years to nab the man accused of selling virtually priceless information to the Soviet Union for a piddling \$35,000.

That has to be, for Americans, one of the most troubling aspects of the Pelton trial which was concluded with his conviction last week in Baltimore, and yet it somehow appears to have won scant attention.

For weeks now CIA Director William Casey, Lt. Gen. William Odom, head of the supersecret National Security Agency, which employed Mr. Pelton for 14 years, and other officials have been issuing threats and warnings to the news media about the obligation to safeguard the national security in reporting about the Pelton trial and the specifics of the information he sold to the Soviets. The media, for its part, have consequently become greatly exercised about possible infringement of their 1st Amendment rights.

But wouldn't it be in order for someone—Mr. Casey, Gen. Odom, FBI Chief William Webster,

even President Reagan—to exhibit at least some mild interest in how someone as obvious and bumbling as Mr. Pelton could escape detection for more than five years by the counter-espionage operations the American public pays for?

Here is a character so hopelessly inept that he missed a debriefing trip the Soviets wanted him to make to Vienna because he ran out of gas on the way to a suburban pizzeria, where he regularly used the pay phone for his dealings with the Soviets, and missed their call.

He filed for bankruptcy even before resigning his \$24,500 job at NSA and was, as the prosecutor in Baltimore pointed out, a man in a "desperate financial situation" but possessed of a "gold mine of information" valuable to the Soviets.

And yet no one tumbled to him until Vitaly Yurchenko, the celebrated high-ranking KGB operative, defected last year and tipped off American authorities about Mr. Pelton's spying. Mr. Yurchenko, of course, subsequently excused himself at dinner with his CIA guard and redefected to Moscow—which also says quite a bit about the efficacy of U.S. counter-intelligence operations.

Mr. Pelton has now been caught and convicted. Presumably, the damage he did to national security is being repaired. And the 1st Amendment appears so far to have survived.

Might it now be time for someone to give some attention to the doubts he has created about the country's counter-intelligence operations? Not every spy can be counted on to be a Larry, Moe or Curly.